

CORRECTIVE ACTION QUICK GUIDE

A practical approach to fixing problems, addressing causes, and preventing recurrence

CORRECTION VS. CORRECTIVE ACTION

Correction fixes the immediate problem. Corrective action addresses why the problem occurred and reduces the likelihood that it will happen again.

Problems occur in every business. The difference is often in what happens after the problem is discovered. Corrective action should not become a paperwork exercise or an automatic search for someone to blame. Its purpose is to restore acceptable performance, address meaningful underlying causes, verify that the response worked, and strengthen the business.

CONTAIN → UNDERSTAND → CORRECT → PREVENT → VERIFY → CLOSE → LEARN

1. Describe the Problem Clearly

- ☐ State the requirement or expected result.
- ☐ Describe the actual condition.
- ☐ Identify where and when the problem occurred.
- ☐ Identify the product, service, process, customer, vendor, location, or activity affected.
- ☐ Record available evidence.
- ☐ Distinguish verified facts from assumptions.
- ☐ Determine whether the problem may exist elsewhere.

EXPECTED → ACTUAL → GAP → IMPACT

EXAMPLE

Weak: "Employee didn't follow procedure."

Better: "Three customer orders processed September 24 were released without the required second-person quantity verification specified in Order Fulfillment SOP OF-02."

2. Contain the Problem

- ☐ Stop affected work where necessary.
- ☐ Separate or identify affected products or materials where applicable.
- ☐ Correct immediate customer or operational impact.
- ☐ Notify appropriate management.
- ☐ Notify customers or other stakeholders when appropriate.
- ☐ Protect relevant records or evidence.
- ☐ Determine whether similar work currently in process could be affected.
- ☐ Establish temporary controls if needed.

CONTAINMENT IS NOT CORRECTIVE ACTION

Containment limits immediate impact. It does not necessarily remove the condition that allowed the problem to occur.

DETERMINE THE RESPONSE AND UNDERSTAND THE CAUSE

3. Decide Whether Formal Corrective Action Is Needed

- ☐ Consider the severity of the problem.
- ☐ Consider customer impact.
- ☐ Consider safety or compliance implications.
- ☐ Consider contractual implications.
- ☐ Consider frequency or recurrence.
- ☐ Consider cost or operational impact.
- ☐ Consider the likelihood of recurrence.
- ☐ Consider whether the same problem may exist elsewhere.
- ☐ Consider whether an important control failed.
- ☐ Consider whether management needs documented follow-through.

MATCH THE RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

A one-time minor error may require a simple correction and coaching. A recurring, significant, customer-impacting, safety-related, or control-related failure may justify a more formal corrective-action process.

4. Investigate the Cause

- ☐ Was the process clearly defined?
- ☐ Was the correct SOP available, accurate, and current?
- ☐ Was the employee adequately trained and was competency verified?
- ☐ Were tools, materials, systems, workload, and scheduling adequate?
- ☐ Did a handoff, approval, or verification control fail?
- ☐ Was required information missing or responsibility unclear?
- ☐ Did equipment, software, or vendor performance contribute?
- ☐ Were warning signs previously observed?
- ☐ Has this problem happened before?

“HUMAN ERROR” MAY NOT BE THE ROOT CAUSE

“Human error” may describe what happened. It may not explain why it happened. If multiple capable employees make the same mistake, the system deserves examination.

Use the 5 Whys as a Simple Investigation Tool

Problem: Shipment went to the wrong customer.

Why 1? Wrong shipping label was applied.

Why 2? Labels for multiple orders were printed together.

Why 3? The employee printed the entire batch before packing.

Why 4? The normal workflow allows batch printing without requiring each label to remain associated with its individual order.

Why 5? The fulfillment process was designed without a verification control linking the shipping label to the packed order before release.

Potential underlying weakness: The fulfillment process lacks a reliable control for verifying that each completed order carries the correct shipping label before shipment.

Five is not a magic number. Keep asking useful questions until the organization understands the conditions that allowed the failure, and support conclusions with available evidence.

CORRECT THE CONDITION AND PREVENT RECURRENCE

5. Correct the Immediate Condition

- ☐ Restore the required condition.
- ☐ Replace, repair, reperform, reprocess, or correct affected work where appropriate.
- ☐ Address customer impact.
- ☐ Correct inaccurate records.
- ☐ Remove temporary containment when appropriate.

6. Address the Underlying Cause

Possible corrective actions may include revising an SOP; clarifying responsibility; retraining employees; verifying competency; changing a form or checklist; adding an approval or verification point; redesigning a handoff; correcting system settings; repairing equipment; modifying scheduling; strengthening vendor controls; improving communication; or redesigning part of the process.

- ☐ The action addresses the identified cause rather than only the symptom.
- ☐ Responsibility is assigned.
- ☐ A completion date is established.
- ☐ Required resources are available.
- ☐ Related documents are updated.
- ☐ Affected employees are informed or trained.
- ☐ Similar processes or locations are considered.
- ☐ New risks created by the change are considered.

RETRAINING IS NOT AUTOMATICALLY CORRECTIVE ACTION

Retraining is appropriate when the employee did not understand or retain the requirement. If the process, SOP, workload, equipment, system, or control caused the problem, retraining alone may accomplish very little.

7. Confirm the Action Was Implemented

- ☐ Assigned actions were completed.
- ☐ Required documentation was updated.
- ☐ Required training occurred.
- ☐ New controls were put into use.
- ☐ Temporary containment was appropriately removed.
- ☐ Completion evidence is available.

8. Verify Effectiveness

- ☐ Re-inspect the affected work.
- ☐ Review subsequent performance.
- ☐ Check for recurrence.
- ☐ Review relevant quality data.
- ☐ Confirm employees are following the revised process.
- ☐ Obtain customer feedback where appropriate.
- ☐ Confirm the change did not create another problem.
- ☐ Allow enough time or data to reasonably evaluate effectiveness.

IMPLEMENTED ≠ EFFECTIVE

A corrective action is not successful simply because the action item was completed. Effectiveness requires evidence that the problem has been controlled or recurrence risk meaningfully reduced.

CLOSE, LEARN AND APPLY THE LESSON

9. Close the Corrective Action Properly

- ☐ Immediate correction is complete.
- ☐ Cause evaluation is documented where appropriate.
- ☐ Corrective action is complete.
- ☐ Required documents and training have been updated.
- ☐ Effectiveness has been evaluated.
- ☐ Open customer commitments are resolved.
- ☐ Responsible management has reviewed significant actions.
- ☐ Closure date and evidence are recorded.

CLOSED SHOULD MEAN COMPLETE AND VERIFIED

A corrective action should not be closed merely because it has been on the action list for a long time. Closure should be supported by appropriate evidence.

10. Look for Broader Lessons

- ☐ Could the same condition exist elsewhere?
- ☐ Do other SOPs contain the same weakness?
- ☐ Do other employees need updated training?
- ☐ Could other customers or accounts be affected?
- ☐ Does another vendor present the same risk?
- ☐ Should inspection criteria change?
- ☐ Should management monitor a new metric?
- ☐ Does this reveal a broader process weakness?
- ☐ Have similar problems occurred previously?

LOOK BEYOND THE INCIDENT

A significant failure should not be treated as an isolated event if the same underlying condition could threaten other processes, customers, vendors, or accounts.

Corrective Action Quick Check

- ☐ Did we clearly define the problem?
- ☐ Did we separate facts from assumptions?
- ☐ Did we contain immediate impact?
- ☐ Did we decide whether formal corrective action was warranted?
- ☐ Did we investigate beyond the obvious symptom?
- ☐ Did we avoid automatically blaming an individual?
- ☐ Does the selected action address the identified cause?
- ☐ Is responsibility assigned?
- ☐ Were affected documents, processes, or training updated?
- ☐ Was implementation verified?
- ☐ Was effectiveness evaluated?
- ☐ Did we consider whether the same problem exists elsewhere?
- ☐ Are customer commitments resolved?
- ☐ Is there evidence supporting closure?

FIVE QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU CLOSE

1. Did we fix the problem - or only clean up the immediate result?

Correction and corrective action are not necessarily the same thing.

2. If the same employees performed the same work tomorrow, what would prevent the problem from recurring?

The answer often reveals whether anything meaningful actually changed.

3. What evidence supports our conclusion about the cause?

Avoid building corrective action around assumptions.

4. How will we know whether the corrective action worked?

Define effectiveness before declaring success.

5. Could the same weakness exist somewhere else in the business?

Corrective action creates more value when lessons are applied beyond the original incident.

FROM PROBLEM TO IMPROVEMENT

CONTAIN immediate impact.

UNDERSTAND what happened and why.

CORRECT the affected condition.

PREVENT recurrence by addressing meaningful causes.

VERIFY implementation and effectiveness.

CLOSE only when appropriate evidence supports closure.

LEARN from the event and apply useful lessons elsewhere.

THE PURPOSE OF CORRECTIVE ACTION

The purpose of corrective action is not to assign blame. It is to restore performance and reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

RELATED ACS RESOURCES

Before corrective action: use the Workplace Quality Inspection Checklist to define standards, inspect performance, document findings, and identify deficiencies.

When the customer has experienced the failure: the planned Service Recovery Guide will address communication, recovery, confidence, and follow-up.

When repeated failures threaten a customer relationship: the planned Losing a Customer Account - Prepare, Respond & Learn guide will address account risk, transition, loss analysis, and protection of other customer relationships.

Would You Like an Independent Look at Your Quality or Corrective-Action Process?

As part of ACS's introduction to the local business community, eligible businesses may request one complimentary Quality & Inspection Introductory Assessment. Depending on the underlying issue, an Operations & Process or SOP & Training assessment may be the more relevant focused review.

There is no fee, no obligation, and no requirement to purchase an ACS service.

Learn more or request an assessment: acsllc-nc.com/assessment

EXPECTATIONS DEFINED. PERFORMANCE MEASURED. RESULTS MANAGED.